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## **'A science to it': flexible time and flexible subjectivity in the digital workplace**

**Frederick H. Pitts**

### **Abstract**

This paper details a research project exploring how work time is structured in the digital industries in the UK, drawing upon a case study of a Bristol web enterprise situated in the 'Silicon Gorge' high-tech hub incorporating ethnography, interviews, observation and time diaries. The role of the internet in blurring the demarcation between paid and unpaid labour features prominently in the work patterns of the research participants. The culture of flexibility that abounds in the case study company harnesses the subjectivities and selves of individual employees to a cycle of 'project time' centred around specific tasks and deadlines, completely divorced from recognition of one's contribution based upon traditional temporal measures.

### **Introduction**

This paper details a research project carried out in spring 2012, exploring how work time is structured in the digital new media industries in the UK. The project employed as a case study a Bristol ICT enterprise, using four members of staff as participants in a mixed methods research design incorporating interviews, observation and time diaries. The long and non-standard working hours found in the ICT industry are evinced in the findings of several pieces of research published in the last decade or so (Perlow 2001; Ross 2003; Tapia 2004; Shih 2004). Almost universally, workplaces are described where the veneer of fun-loving flexibility is sustained upon an undertow of eighty hour weeks, unpaid overtime and the destruction of the boundary between home life and work.

Johanna Shih's research (2004) presents a great example. Her research into the structure of the working day in Silicon Valley ICT enterprises suggests that a culture of flexibility abounds that harnesses the subjectivities and selves of individual employees to a cycle of 'project time' centred around specific tasks and accompanying deadlines and completely divorced from any notion of recompense or recognition of one's contribution based upon the traditional measure of 'clock time'. Thus, an 'objective work schedule' is replaced by a 'subjective demand for commitment'. In this way, greater

flexibility and variability of the working day actually *erodes* worker control over their own time, subordinated to the ebb and flow of the project cycle (Shih 2004:231).

Shih ends the report of her findings with a recommendation. As the Silicon Valley model spreads across the world, 'careful consideration to the social and individual costs of this region's success' must be given in order to ascertain the import of such temporal structures beyond the immediate geographical locale in which the study took place (2004:243). The multiplication of such a 'Silicon' model demands our attention as to the implications for the workers involved. The UK is increasingly home to high-tech hubs such as Silicon Gorge around Bristol, Silicon Fen near Cambridge and Silicon Roundabout in London (*The Economist*, 6<sup>th</sup> August 2011:13). This study will seek to ascertain whether some of the trends in working time found in Silicon Valley start-ups are found in UK equivalents.

The South-West's 'Silicon Gorge' might present such an example of where the Silicon Valley model of work time has taken root. So named because of its proximity to Somerset's Cheddar Gorge, the moniker refers to a loose assortment of big-name high-tech firms and Internet start-ups gathered around Bristol and the surrounding area. The *Economist's* profile focuses primarily on the microchip manufacturers that are held to constitute the historical and financial hub of the Gorge (2011:24), but elsewhere, the term's coverage is extended to include a series of young, ascendant web companies identified in common by their alignment to a constellation of local industry networks. Elastic Brand [a pseudonym], the case study company used in this research, fall into the latter category. Their varied retinue, straddling several areas common to a number of Silicon-style enterprises including creative and social media, advertising, consultancy and software development, render them an ideal case study for investigating work time in the geographical and industrial locale which Silicon Gorge is said to represent.

In an ethnographic study of an ICT firm at the height of the Dot.Com boom, Andrew Ross (2003) details a number of notable features that suggest some commonality between companies in the sector. These include an attitude to work time which, whilst celebrating informality and flexibility, extends the working day under their auspices; the extension of the 'solving of creative problems' into one's own spare time; an emphasis on the development of skills and social bonds that demands the investment of free time,

stripping away the boundaries between work and non-work time; and the incorporation of personalities, subjectivities and selves in the communicative and cognitive servicing of the labour task (Ross 2003:44). Ross highlights reports of eighty-hour workweeks in ICT-based enterprises (Ross 2003:51). Research by Andrea Tapia (2004) recounts working schedules that would span from 8am until 7pm *inside* the workplace, and then from 9pm until sleep at home (Tapia 2004:310-11). Thus, the indistinctiveness between work and non-work time highlighted in both the conceptual literature and the existing research has both the qualitative element of the similarity between work and life, and the quantitative aspect of an actual extension of work time past the formal boundaries of the working day. The qualitative and quantitative sides of this pervading indistinctiveness find expression in the mixed methods design of the research presented in this paper, whereby I collected time diaries accounting for the hours worked and the way in which time is used over twenty-four hours, alongside observational descriptions and accounts given by participants in the interviews.

The expanding body of work associated with time-use research primarily draws upon direct observation and diary studies. The latter are highlighted as particularly suitable for the study of work, allowing the researcher access to daily and weekly routines of economic activity, whether paid in the workplace or unpaid at home (Gershuny 2011, p. 3). Structured observation features the direct observation of participants in the field, recorded at set intervals of time (Bryman 1992, pp. 172-175). Bryman suggests that structured observation works best when combined with other methods, which can resolve deficits in the researcher's understanding of the participant's own account of their time use. Furthermore, some activities are likely to be inaccessible to the researcher's gaze, whether for reasons of practicality, privacy, or understanding, and as such it is wise to include another method, such as interviews or time diaries, with which this precluded territory can be captured (Bryman 2004, p. 178). The combination of structured observation and diary methods with semi-structured interviews in the research seeks to address this issue, attempting to bridge the gaps in understanding that might result from a more narrow approach. The study into work-time in the ICT sector conducted by Perlow (2001) provides a good example of how these methods can be used in combination.

The tripartite model of data collection was designed so as to produce a broad picture of the structure of not only the formal working day but the way in which it is located in the wider processes that make-up the participant's waking hours. In the structured observation, I observed participants working at their desks for a single one-hour period. The observation employed 'continuous recording' (Bryman 2004:171), whereby I recorded in five-minute segments the activities and time-use of the participants on an 'observation schedule' (Bryman 2004:168). The interviews were semi-structured, whereby I had a handful of central questions which I wanted to ask, but within which free-flowing discussion was encouraged in which I could pose different questions based upon what the participant felt was important to speak about or what I considered significant to pursue further. The semi-structured nature of the interviews also permitted me to pose questions about what had been recorded in the observations. Additionally, participants were asked to fill in two time diaries. The first asked respondents to fill in details, at half-hour intervals, of their activities over the course of one working day, at home and in the workplace. The second asked respondents to give details of the hours they worked over one working week. The combination of the three methods enabled insight into the situation of the working day within the wider twenty-four hours of the participant's life, facilitating knowledge of what took place in their spare time where that might not have been possible or practical in person.

Each of the four participants worked for one component of the overall Elastic Brand operation [all names henceforth are pseudonymous]. Moira was Studio Manager, with responsibilities for the administration of the whole studio. Mertyl was Publisher Manager, with responsibility for managing the relationship with bloggers and viral advertisement publishers. Maurice was a Test Developer, fixing problems and seeing to issues with the software created and administered by the firm. Perhaps most interesting of all was Madeleine, who did not have a job title. She was principally tasked with browsing the web for inspiration and coming up with ideas for projects for Elastic Brand's advertising production activities. It was Madeleine who perhaps provided the most interesting data. Madeleine said that people she knows 'underestimate' what she does for a living, ridiculing the fact that she spends a great proportion of her time surfing the web. However, she was adamant that '*there's a science to it*'. It is this strange 'science'

which renders it such a stellar phenomenon with which to gain insight into work time in new media's world of digital labour.

The overall research design was informed by grounded theory. Grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) is a procedure through which theory is developed, built up gradually from a constant series of working hypotheses and hunches which direct the thrust of the research towards areas of momentary conceptual interest or terrain of rich theoretical yield. This ongoing movement between abstract and concrete facilitates the creation of a theory that possesses as great an amount of proximity as is possible to the actual circumstances that it seeks to describe and extrapolate from. Practically, this is achieved through the formulation of a series of codes, categories and concepts which form the raw materials of a data analysis that seeks to systematize and associate these elements in a cohesive conceptual impression (*ibid.*, pp. 71-72).

A grounded theory research design encourages an exploratory approach unshackled by concerns of replicability and generalizability. Rather, the intention is to create theory from the concrete conditions that the researcher finds in the field. Case study research is especially suited to this ethos. The researcher is led by their intuition, sampling theoretically and opportunistically in order to pursue hunches and lines of enquiry towards areas of rich theoretical yield. This exploratory approach is the correct way to make forays into an area of research in which the empirical and theoretical body of work is still developing. The combination of grounded theory with mixed methods possesses the advantage of allowing a many-sided study of the topic of work time that incorporates objective and subjective elements in order to enhance the plausibility of the resultant theory.

Grounded theory data analysis is achieved through the piecemeal creation of an interlocking series of codes, categories and concepts, each representing a new level of abstraction from the concrete phenomena, yet constantly referred back upon the concrete circumstances uncovered in the research for confirmation (Glaser and Strass, 1967., pp. 71-2). This constellation of themes, coalescing in a group of high-level concepts, finds eventual resolution in a theory endowed with optimum plausibility achieved by the iterative process by which it was formulated.

As Sayer suggests, social scientific theory is the product of a double movement between concrete and abstract. Due to the way in which concrete conditions may initially appear to us 'superficial and chaotic', abstracting from them can allow us to access the 'diverse determinations' which underlie them. The true 'concreteness' of the phenomena can thus only be accessed via recourse to abstraction (Sayer 2002, p. 87), by which the abstract is related back upon the concrete in order to verify the plausibility of its conceptualization, 'gauged by the realization of expectations about the world and its activity' (ibid., p. 69). Grounded theory method presents such a thoroughgoing approach to the generation of theory

The first stage of data analysis recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967, pp. 106-7) involves the comparison and coding of incidences and evidence. I did this by going through the data carefully and meticulously, including the time diary returns, observation notes and interview transcripts, noting reoccurring or significant themes. The second phase of data analysis recommended by Glaser and Strauss is that in which codes are compared in order to relate them to common properties. The third stage requires the delimitation of the theory thus far tentatively developed through the ongoing relation of theory and data by modifying, refining and discarding the categories generated based upon their theoretical purpose and utility, and through the integration of those possessing similar properties into a series of 'higher level concepts' (ibid., pp. 110-111). The six higher-level conceptual components that arose from the data were '*connectivity*', '*flexible subjectivity*', '*productive procrastination*', '*disciplined discretion*', '*multitasking*' and '*project time*'.

The first refers to the necessity of being *connected* to the work carried out by the project participants, both to colleagues, clients, consumers and the constant cycle of trends and know-how set in motion by the internet. Madeleine's work required her to look at not only the quantitative evidence of site or community's success, based upon Facebook, Twitter or blog visitor figures, but also the qualitative evidence presented by people's comments 'below the line' or on internet forums. This constant subjection to the thoughts of others requires an empathetic and interpretative sensibility. In addition, Madeleine's consumption of media itself contributed towards this empathy towards the audience necessary for her production of ideas. She spoke of the feeling of being connected at all times in a 'media whirlwind' of different communicative and cognitive



stimuli. The sources incorporated into Madeleine's research included not only social media and other exclusively internet-oriented domains of creativity, but art, music and film too- the whole cultural pantheon of twenty-first century popular culture, high and low. There was the sense that Madeleine lived on the time of a radically fluctuating cultural turnover, forever needing to be ahead of the curve and 'constantly on the lookout for new sites'.

The implications for the structure of working time in this cultivation of relationships and empathy feeding directly into the working task are significant. These things are not aspects of life or activity reducible only to paid employment, but elements that transcend the boundaries of the working day and invest all of life. It is no wonder, therefore, that the participants often worked from home and recognized the incorporation of their own subjectivity into the labour process. These issues are subsumed under the next concept, of *flexible subjectivity*.

*Flexible subjectivity* refers to the way in which the flexible working structures combine with the content of the substantive working roles of the participants to incorporate their own personas and subjectivity into the service of the employment task. Flexible time is a centripetal force around which a number of issues related to subjectivity, creativity, and self revolve. Elastic Brand had one *explicit* rule as regards time: in by ten, leave whenever. However, it might be asserted that in practice, 'leave whenever' more often than not means 'leave later than you would if there were set working hours'. Madeleine made the assertion that this flexible working pattern 'breeds a really healthy working environment because you end up *wanting* to stay'. This is interesting, as it reveals the way in which flexible working cultures actually subtly induce the worker's own subjectivity into matters. As Madeleine implies, the flexibility afforded by the company makes you *want* to work.

This manifests itself in frequent home working among the participants. Everyone can access their work emails at home through log-in details provided when one begins employment with Elastic Brand, and Moira and Mertyl both gave lengthy descriptions of the way in which they often work from home, effectively exploited by this tacit connection to work by the email infrastructure. At the farthest end of the spectrum was Madeleine, who told me that she spends around four or five hours a week doing work-

related business at home, usually responding to emails or keeping in contact with bloggers. The night before the interview she had spent two hours working, and says that 'it was sort of out of the blue, *completely* my own choice.' She emphasizes that no-one had asked her to do it, but that she was purely endeavouring to do as good a job as possible, doing one or two things on her laptop whilst watching television at ten o'clock at night, then suddenly realizing that two hours had passed.

Although, when asked *when* ideas come to her, Madeleine responded that because she is now 'paid to think' she doesn't 'think as much outside work', this flexible, nurturing culture has the outcome of incorporating wider spheres and modes of the worker's activity into the service of production. This is apparent in the way in which the company perpetrates a caring, sharing ethos which encourages innovation and creativity in a manner that seems innocuous but in reality expands that field of inspiration and ideas which the industry relies upon. It could be asserted that an industry which deals in ideas may end up colonizing and turning to productive use even those ideas that have nothing to do with work

It seems that one of the mediums through which this flexible, decentred time of production incorporates the worker's subjectivity into the labour process is the internet. This manifests itself in fairly direct ways: Madeleine updated three Twitter feeds: her own, the company's and a client's, and both Madeleine and Mertyl used their own Facebook and Twitter accounts for searching, using, following and contacting blogs and websites. These internet personas are not remote parts of the participants' lives. For some, such as Madeleine, the relation between the internet and her life and self was intense. The internet held a kind of existential significance for Madeleine; 'it feels really personal, I feel like I've grown up on the internet, like it's just the *best place* ever', she said; 'I always feel it doesn't matter where I am, I'm *home*, [...] like *everything's there*, it's like my little home, it's my little home from home.'

It is evident that everything Madeleine had 'a hand in creatively' has a piece of her 'own interests in it'; the material she surveyed whilst in work more often than not held external interest for her aswell. Indeed, the reason that Madeleine gave for not taking a lunch break was that 'her life is her work'. However, this was phrased in the culture of this workplace as a relationship subject to the freedom of the worker, whereas this

freedom can be seen as conditional upon, constitutive of and structured by a framework of temporal discipline essential to the functioning of the labour process.

The workers were subject to something we shall call 'productive procrastination', whereby traditional tactics against employer control and the discipline of the clock are in fact productive of the kind of outcomes desired by the employers, with procrastination and distraction enlarging the field of inspiration, communication and ideas necessary for the participants to succeed in their roles. It would seem that apparent diversions such as idly browsing the web actually enrich the pool of cultural affinity and awareness of trends that contributes usefully to the completion of the participants' work. Madeleine described 'tumbling down a rabbit-hole' of media from which she sometimes struggled to return. However, it is this very 'tumble' that is productive of the inspiration and ideas she is charged with conceiving. In this way, some of the traditional strategies and tactics for the avoidance of subordination to the discipline of the clock are channelled instead into productive work time itself. As with the concept of connectivity, one cannot always disconnect oneself from work, in the same way that one cannot be disconnected from the communicative, cognitive and cultural processes of digital labour. This is the strength of what has been called 'immaterial' production (Lazzarato 1996), in which the stuff of everyday human activity becomes the force enriching the eventual product of one's labours.

The fourth concept is that of what we shall call 'disciplined discretion'. Even in relatively junior positions, the participants were endowed with decision-making capacities unsubordinated to the direct control of superiors or line managers, removing any sense that the internal composition of the working day was structured by anything other than the will and subjective preference of the employee. The placing of the machinery of independence in the hands of individual workers is a theme common to the accounts given by the participants, and can be witnessed by just looking at the seemingly non-hierarchical mode of operation embraced by the company and expressed in the studio atmosphere. However, in an extension of the theme of flexible subjectivity expounded earlier, this decision-making apparatus actually serves to ever-increasingly recruit the worker's own subjectivity and sense of self into the fabric of production. Although discretion may be had over the use of one's time, it is a *disciplined* discretion that ends up doing away with any need for strict hierarchical controls, enacting a programme of

power through the conduit of the worker's own command and personality. Furthermore, *when* one makes decisions, to the extent that one has independence, may not necessarily fall within the confines of the formal working day. Indeed, one can have a bright idea, a sudden *volte face* or a brilliant plan in the shower, at the shops, or on holiday. Independence can be a poisoned chalice, promising freedom but extending the reach of the network of little moments of production that constitute the working day.

The fifth concept, *multitasking*, relates to the various tactics and strategies the participants engaged in to organize the internal structure of the working day through the allocation and ordering of tasks. Much of the work the participants carried out was marked by multitasking, the taking on of multiple duties and responsibilities at once, rather than repetitive and piecemeal assembly-line style tasks. One of the ways in which this was achieved was through the introduction of multiple computer screens. The dual computer screen is an efficiency-raising technological innovation which can be seen as a way of speeding up the labour process, allowing workers to multitask, switching from one screen to the other whilst waiting for things to load. This rationalization effectively changes the inner temporal structure of the working day, meaning that the day is not broken up by sequential tasks but by a constant combination of different tasks competing for the attention of the employee. This means that it is not as simple as stating that work-time in this example functions on 'task' time rather than 'clock' time, because the 'tasks' themselves are hard to treat in isolation from one another. Perhaps a better means to look at this organization of time is through the lens of 'project time', a time distinct from what Moira called the 'fixed, routine, standard' time of the everyday grind. Despite the distinction, 'project time' almost seems to constitute a near permanent state of affairs, and it is to this that we turn for the sixth and final concept.

This concept refers to the way in which work time alternates between 'routine, fixed, standard' time, and 'project time', which is a phrase adopted from the research by Shih (2004) outlined earlier, in which the internal and overall structure of the working day becomes intensified and extended in the service of meeting deadlines for completion. The principal findings of Shih's research were that the organization of time in Silicon Valley workplaces was not determined by the predetermined 'clock time' of most companies, but on a cycle of intensity based upon looming deadlines. The flexibility and autonomy afforded the workers possessed a double-edged quality, both enabling

workers to self-regulate working hours whilst lacking any firm temporal foundation with which to contain working hours spiralling out of control at certain times of the production schedule. This flexibility is thus shown to be a means by which 'managers can obtain limitless amounts of labor.' The 'lack of a rigid temporal structure' meant that salaried employees possessed neither the ability to register total hours worked nor the capacity to establish a boundary between work-time and non-work time. Due to the fevered market atmosphere of innovation and competition, based upon a shelf life of only three months for the average internet product, threw the temporal dynamic of the workplace at the beck and call of a wildly fluctuating economic situation. Hence, 'the patterns of the market become the patterns of work' (2004:231-2).

The participants provided a picture whereby 'project time' exerted a significant influence over their working hours, marked by a variable intensity of work geared around projects and deadlines. The threat and promise of deadlines present themselves as an inducement to give one's all in the service of the firm, whether to succeed in the long-term or simply to overcome the challenge in the short-term. This is enacted through the active recruitment of the very stuff of the worker's life into the production process: personality, subjectivity, self, emotions, interests, creativity and, crucially, their time, free, spare and easy.

These conceptual elements suggest that flexibility acts as a subtle mechanism by which the worker's life and spare time can be incorporated as productive 'moments of profit' and subordinated to the logic of the labour process.

It is 'connectivity' that gives shape to the working lifeworld of the participants in this research project. The exploitation of this connectivity is key for the completion of many of the labouring activities the participants are charged with.

The concept of flexible subjectivity represents the key means by which this connectivity is first manifested through the subjectivities of the participants and subsequently temporally constituted as an aspect of the labour process by flexible work regimes that place no clear container or boundaries upon the time in which production takes place.

The concept of productive procrastination displays the way in which the emotional, cognitive, communicative and cultural content is put to work as a practical part of the

labour process, where thinking itself has become immediately productive and enriching of the end product.

The concept of disciplined discretion gives further indication of the way in which the flexible work regime inculcates the machinery of control within the workers themselves; where the culture of flexibility helps police the external circumscription of the working day, the culture of independence serves to police the internal make-up of the working day.

Independence on the part of workers is seen as the principal mechanism organizing tasks in the workplace, which are usually approached with recourse to a procedure of multitasking mediated through the employment of efficiency-gear technological *dispositifs* such as having two computer screens per worker. This multitasking constitutes another of the concepts subsumed in the theoretical explanation.

Despite the organization of this multitasking being commonly understood as dictated by individually-decided frameworks subject to the independence encouraged by the company culture, the temporal constraints in which these tasks take place still ultimately suffer subordination to a series of deadlines linked to an endless, ubiquitous 'project time', which persists in a cycle in which periods of stress and demand differ in degree only and not, crucially, in their looming omnipresence over the schedules of the employees involved.

Work time in the ICT sector, based upon the case study used in this research, is structured boundlessly and fleetingly both internally and externally, through a range of mechanisms that, whilst proffering apparent flexibility and opportunities for independence and creativity, actually procure the life of the worker, including spare time, into the service of labour. The results produced a series of concepts that were eventually subsumed under both a substantive and a formal theory of work-time in the ICT sector. The research contributes to our understanding of trends towards Silicon-style tech clusters and the culture of work time they engender, with special focus upon how such models operate in a UK context. The results of the data ultimately reveal work-time in the ICT sector to be structured by a framework of flexibility which incorporates ever further the life of the worker into time spent servicing the ends of production.

We have noted that the Silicon Valley model of work time might be a tendency common to other high-tech clusters around the world. It seems that Silicon Gorge presents one such example, based upon our case study. The spread of internet entrepreneurship and the replication of the Silicon Valley model in places such as Silicon Gorge and Silicon Roundabout in London, needs to be accompanied by an attention to the potential ways in which working patterns might impinge upon lifestyles and bear implications for wellbeing. The generalization of such models of work time should be kept in check, because wider acceptance of such time regimes will serve to chip away at any conception of statutory limits upon the working day. The move towards a post-Fordist economy in which increasing number of workers are called upon to perform tasks linked to cognitive, communicative, emotional and cultural capabilities and affinities presents fertile ground for the spread of such working patterns. The flexibility, freedom and independence seemingly engendered in some such roles are perpetually tempered by the tendency towards an all-encompassing working day which is so intangible as to be completely uncontrollable.

The paper demonstrates the way in which management practices have evolved- where 'less' management contradictorily equals 'more', with the governance of the labour process 'outsourced' to the workers themselves. The familiar call for the ability to labour more freely and have more discretion over one's work is here transformed into something far less appealing: an imperative in many post-industrial workplaces which bears significant dividends for employers and nefarious impacts for employees. This differs markedly from the restrictions on free time which are exhibited in more traditional forms of workplace exploitation, and requires a rethinking of the position from which critical approaches to work advance their critiques. Furthermore, it suggests that power in the workplace need not centre on domination of the employee by the direct control of the employers, but a more diffuse and decentred web of relations that is both harder to grasp theoretically and empirically, and much harder to resist.

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### **Biographical note**

Frederick H. Pitts is a PhD student at the University of Bath, UK. His research is informed by a critical engagement with the Marxian critique of political economy, and concerns work and work-time in post-industrial occupations with specific reference to the cultural and creative industries.

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